



WARD ONE COUNCILMEMBER JIM GRAHAM, CSOSA DIRECTOR PAUL QUANDER, CSOSA ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR CEDRIC HENDRICKS AND OTHERS CELEBRATE THE OPENING OF CSOSA'S NEW RESIDENTIAL DRUG TREATMENT CENTER ON CLIFTON ST. NW.

RETHINKING "RE-ENTRY"

Community members embrace ex-offenders

by SKAIDRA BLANFORD

Ex-offender Joseph Mimms and the Reverend Sharon Best of New Commandment Baptist Church in Northwest are unlikely friends; their bond grew from the support she offered Mr. Mimms upon his return to the District from prison. As he transitioned to "life on the outside," the Reverend Best was always close by—pointing out opportunities for advancement and cautioning against those temptations that might sabotage his new start. Mr. Mimms says, "Ms. Best has always been there to encourage me and say 'Hey Joseph, how are you doing?' and I think that is positive."

Reverend Best is Cluster Coordinator C for Wards 1, 2, 3 and 4 in the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency's (CSOSA) new faith-based prisoner re-entry program. The program allows the Community Supervision Officers of CSOSA, who monitor ex-offenders from their field offices around the city, to enlist members of local churches, mosques and synagogues as a natural system of sup-

port in the fight against crime. These worshippers form one-on-one relationships with ex-offenders, offering everything from relationship advice and job-placement to the comfort of being part of a greater community. The Reverend Best explains, "There are some people who have no connection to the community because they have burned a lot of bridges. We tell them we will be their family."

Six thousand District residents are currently incarcerated in federal penitentiaries with two thousand returning to the city every year. The vast majority of their offenses and re-offenses are related to the complexities of substance abuse. In the District, where drug and alcohol abuse stands at nearly twice the national average of US states, ex-offenders must be especially vigilant against falling back into their old patterns of behavior. Washington-native and Director of CSOSA Paul Quander wants the positive guidance of the faith-based mentors to bolster the extensive drug treatment efforts of his agency. He recalls, "My mother once told me, 'I told you to do XYZ and you didn't do it, but when your friends tell you to do XYZ—you do it! How come?'" Drawing from this lesson of his youth, Director Quander explains that an upstanding community member greeting ex-prisoners at the bus-stop upon their return to DC can quite literally supplant

the negative influences of the street.

CSOSA is now piloting a video-mentoring program with the 1,000 Washingtonians currently incarcerated in North Carolina's Rivers Facility. Mentors come to the agency's downtown office to communicate with the inmates from Rivers whom they will mentor upon release. According to CSOSA Associate Director Cedric Hendricks, the results are positive: "We have seen people offered jobs, maintain contact with families, and talk to their mentors about distance learning with the video-conferencing." Based on the pilot program, CSOSA currently seeks to extend the program to women's facilities in Alderson, West Virginia and Danbury, Connecticut.

In the often-impersonal world of social services and government oversight, CSOSA and its faith-based volunteers are stepping up to the plate. CSOSA Public Affairs Specialist Leonard Sipes explains, "I have been to many community meetings with ministers and imams who recognize that we have a collective problem and are willing to do something about it personally. We are trying to harness that energy for the betterment of the individual and the community." Still—some have their reservations. Director Quander says, "A lot of the faith institutions have some trepida-

tion because they just don't know. But by the same token, you don't know who is on Supervision. These are the people who cut your hair and fix your car—unless someone receives 'life,' you cannot lock up a problem forever."

Mr. Mimms, currently employed as a driver and considering a future in social work, says that he understands the fear that community members may feel when meeting ex-offenders. Still, he stresses that most ex-offenders are searching for a way out of their past lifestyle and for this he greatly admires those mentors who do come forward. He reflects, "I think that anyone who becomes a mentor is doing it because they care—so their safeguard is being God-fearing and taking a chance on another person's life."

Persons interested in learning more about CSOSA's Faith-based Reentry program may contact Hallem H. Williams, Sr. Program Analyst, Community Justice Programs, Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency for the District of Columbia at 202.220.5306 or by email at hal.williams@csosa.gov.

COLUMBIA HEIGHTS COMMUNITY MARKETPLACE

Taste a tomato, widen your world

by BETHANY SPICHER

I'm a volunteer at the Columbia Heights Community Marketplace. Why? Because a typical morning at the marketplace goes like this: At 8:15, I arrive at the gravel lot by the metro station. The farmers are already piling vegetables and arranging flowers under their canopies. Samantha, who is five years old, runs from the Penn Farm stand to say "Buenos dias" and give me a hug. Mr. Poole, a fellow volunteer who grew up in Columbia Heights, shares neighborhood news as we set up the market tent.

At 8:30, we open the gate and Abdel strolls in with a cup of coffee. He chooses some green peppers and comments about current events in Sudan, his home country. Jen comes to buy apples with her dog Rosie and tells me about her work as a special-education teacher.

I break for breakfast: one of Miss Minnie's homemade cobbles. I stop at Adassa's umbrella to look at her afghans and listen to her stories about growing up in Jamaica. Back at the